
Alosh, M. Ablan Wa Sablan: Functional Modern Standard Arabic for International Learners.

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. Includes: Audio program CD. ISBN: 0-300-10378-6.

As an instructor of Arabic, as well as a fluent speaker of Standard Arabic, I have looked at *Ablan Wa Sablan: Functional Modern Standard Arabic for International Learners* from the point of view of its intended audience and find that this text, written specifically for native speakers of English, has some very strong points. However, there are also areas that need to be revised in a future edition, especially with regard to the presentation of culture. Before discussing the concept of culture and how it may be used as a tool to better teach Arabic, I would like to look at the text under review and see how it fulfills its stated learning objectives.

The audio program accompanying *Ablan Wa Sablan: Functional Modern Standard Arabic for International Learners* is very useful to the learner, as Arabic has many difficult sounds that require sample pronunciation by a native speaker. However, the speed of audio samples needs to be adjusted to better suit the abilities of the average learner. The audio program is intended for intermediate learners, and I contend that speech samples should be delivered at a reasonably slow speed, one that requires learners to listen to sounds again and again and have enough time to practice them on their own.

For learners of a second language, it is very useful to understand how the target language works grammatically (parts of speech), syntactically (sentence structure),

semantically (the creation of meaning), and stylistically (sociolinguistic context). All these topics are covered in *Ablan Wa Sablan*. Unfortunately, much of this material is very sophisticated and, as we know, sometimes complex grammar explanations confuse rather than aid the learner. For instance, on pages 4-5, the author introduces the “verbal sentence” as an Arabic structure. This is a substantial piece of information for learners whose native language (English) starts with a noun or a noun phrase, but never with a verb, as in Arabic. Next, the author covers various other parts of speech and cases, such as the nominative and the objective. I argue that this knowledge is impractical for intermediate learners. Such information may help students of Arabic to learn about cases but probably will not enhance their ability to communicate. Instead, what may be helpful is to introduce grammar in context and provide as many practice exercises as possible so that learners can understand the structure under study and learn how to use it to communicate.

Another strong point of *Ablan Wa Sablan* is its emphasis on vocabulary, which includes a great variety of verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions. Nonetheless, it is crucial to organize information in such a way that it facilitates teaching and learning. Phonetics may help students achieve that objective. Some teachers might argue that phonetics is unnecessary, since this is an intermediate-level book. However, I would argue that phonetics is an integral part of any non-Western language course. In a French course, on the other hand, a native English speaker may have less difficulty reading and spelling the words correctly because the alphabet is not an obstacle to overcome, since both of these languages use a similar, Latin-based alphabet.

Culture is always an important part of learning a foreign language because that language and culture are intertwined. Without providing the learner with an appreciation of Arabic culture, therefore, it is very difficult to learn Arabic. In *Ablan Wa Sablan*, happily, culture is never neglected. Still, the learner’s own native culture — in this case American culture — should be presented in each chapter of the book in order to enable learners to draw on their own cultural experience as they learn Arabic. After all, a learner’s own culture is a reference point that facilitates drawing valuable comparisons. In *Ablan Wa Sablan* culture is presented in various ways, for example, through the study of names of characters or places. However, I feel that a section on Arabic culture, in English, also would be very helpful because it would make it possible to learn Arabic while at the same time gaining an in-depth understanding of Arabic culture.

Before looking at a sample chapter, it may be worth mentioning that chapters 1-18 focus on syntactic structures that aim at building the learner’s semantic knowledge. For example, Chapter 1 introduces the learner to the conditional conjunction of future time “if” or “ithā” in Arabic; Chapter 5 presents the verb of approximation “kāda”; and Chapter 9 explores prepositional phrases. The point I am trying to make is that each chapter is structured around a specific grammatical and syntactic task to help students attain the appropriate communicative goal. Experts in foreign language methodology and theory have agreed that syntax and phonetics are extremely helpful in becoming fluent in the target language. Still, I would argue that content must be related to the learner’s first language; perhaps this can be accomplished in a future edition of *Ablan Wa Sablan*. For instance, Chapter 1 introduces the conditional type one (i.e., if +

present + future). The chapter content is about announcements and advertisements. For a mainstream native English speaker to learn the conditional, it may be easier to start the lesson with a section on the learner's cultural background (i.e., American culture) because the learner can relate to it. In other words, before teaching the learner complete grammatical structures such as the conditional, it may be useful to introduce examples from the learner's cultural background to facilitate learning. My recommendation is to introduce the learner's own culture first. To clarify this point, let me mention a few examples from the text. Chapter 1, as previously mentioned, teaches the conditional type one. The author begins the chapter with signs, billboards, and advertisements from Arabic culture, in Arabic. Instead, my recommendation is to begin the chapter with American signs and advertisements in order to make the learner comfortable with the content and linguistic structures featured. Chapter 5 is about a TV program called "With People." The chapter starts with a visit to the Damascus National Museum. The choice of the text is excellent, as is the way it is presented, with photos, maps and pictures, all of which enrich the cultural content of the lesson. My recommendation, however, is to begin the chapter with an American TV program that an American student can relate to and draw on intuitively to better assimilate the content of the lesson. Chapter 14 also contains a section on the Egyptian Nobel laureate Najib Mahfoud and his magnificent collection of short stories, *The Paradise of Children*. As difficult as this chapter may be due to the richness of its information on multicultural education, literature and Arabic grammar, it would have been useful to begin with a famous American author who writes about similar subjects and then draw a comparison between this author and Najib Mahfoud. This approach would enable students to better understand Mahfoud's story. Thus, what is often called the learner's "cultural capital" (referring to the culture that a person acquires in the social environment in which he or she grew up) can have a positive impact on the learning process.

In a study by Chiappe et al. (2002), data show that although bilingual children and children taking ESL performed more poorly than native English-speaking children on most measures, they acquired basic literacy skills by drawing on their first language. Language background *per se* did not explain variance in children's literacy performance; rather, knowledge of the alphabet and phonological processing were important contributors to early literacy skills among all groups of children. What this may suggest is the importance of culture capital in second language instruction. If children use similar techniques to learn L1 as they do learning L2, it should be in all aspects of learning, from alphabetical and phonological knowledge to syntactic, grammatical, and cultural knowledge. It is important to incorporate all these elements together into one lesson to be able to achieve positive results. In fact, comparative language studies (Geva, Wade-Woolley, & Shany, 1997; Koda, 1996) have proven the importance of L1 in learning all aspects of L2. For instance, Koda (1996) stated in a review of L2 reading studies, many involving college-level L2 students, that it is important in L2 reading research to consider effects of L1 experience. Consequently, it is crucial for books and learning materials of L2 to include experiences and knowledge drawn from the learner's L1.

Next I will examine a sample chapter to show strengths and weaknesses in the presentation of culture. The objectives of Chapter 10 include teaching how to

describe activities in the past, places, and people, and reviewing material previously presented, such as the permutative “idāfa,” the verb “to be,” etc. To meet these objectives, the author creates the following scenario: Michael Brown (the lead character in this textbook series) visits Tadmer/Belmar and Halab and learns about each place. These short texts more than fulfill chapter objectives, I think. There is enough narration and use of the past tense, as well as sufficient information describing past activities, people, and the character of both Syrian cities, in addition to review of earlier chapters. Picking this chapter at random reflects chapter content in general and also demonstrates the author’s approach, which is based on reviewing material previously learned before moving forward. Once students comprehend the texts dealing with Tadmer/Belmar and Halab, they will be able to learn a fair amount of language and culture in fewer than ten pages. The issue is how much a native English-speaking student will gain from the content of these texts. Certainly students will learn a lot about pronunciation, spelling, reading, and writing. When it comes to semantics and meaning, however, they may have difficulty connecting structures and semantics because of the simple fact that they need a lot of culture capital to be able to do so well. Imagine a group of students of different nationalities: a Chinese, a Japanese, an American, and an Iranian. If we teach them the same chapter, I guarantee that only the Farsi-speaking student will do well semantically because he/she has the advantage of connecting well to the culture presented in the chapter. Hence this person will better learn other items as well, such as idioms, grammatical structures, and tenses. The other students probably will have their own unique set of difficulties because they lack the advantage of the context — the cultural context. Learning a language requires a familiarity with a cultural context. For this reason, I suggest that incorporating the learner’s native culture into each lesson develops an understanding of the target culture and language.

Ablan Wa Sablan is an attractive text that will teach students Arabic and also give them rich insights into Arabic culture. Alish has achieved his goal of providing learners with a realistic and stimulating set of activities. My only recommendation would be to somehow integrate the American learner’s cultural capital, which would make learning Arabic a lot easier and more educational.

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